



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

News Release

Pacific Islands External Affairs Office

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Critical Habitat for Newcomb's Snail Designated on Kauai

Critical habitat for a tiny freshwater snail found only in a few of Kauai's remote streams was designated today by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in an effort to enhance protections for this threatened species. The final rule, which becomes effective in 30 days, incorporates new information provided during the public comment period on the proposed rule.

"Although this is one of our smaller critical habitat packages, it is a good example of the important role public comments can play in the designation process," said Anne Badgley, regional director for the Fish and Wildlife Service's Pacific Region. "Based on information provided in response to our draft rule, we were able to fine-tune our designation to eliminate 4.1 miles of stream segments and 737 acres of adjacent riparian areas from the final rule."

The new critical habitat units include 12.3 miles of stream channel and 4,479 acres of adjacent riparian area within the Kalalau, Hanakoa, Hanakapiai, Lumahai, Hanalei, Waipahee, Makaleha, and North Wailua stream systems. The riparian areas provide for shade, moderate water flow, retain sediment, and introduce nutrients into the stream habitat, all of which are important to the Newcomb's snail.

The Fish and Wildlife Service received a total of 1,818 written and oral comments during two public comment periods, according to Paul Henson, field supervisor for the agency's Pacific Islands Fish and Wildlife Office.

"We really appreciate the efforts of the public to communicate with us on this issue, and we take those comments seriously," Henson said. "We've made three major changes from the proposed rule based on information we received during the comment period."

Based on new information received, the downstream boundaries of two critical habitat units – Waipahee Stream and the North Fork of the Wailua River – were modified to eliminate the stream channels and riparian areas below existing diversion dams. These diversion structures were built in the early 1900s during expansion of the sugar cane industry in the Hawaiian Islands. At times, these structures completely remove water from the stream to irrigation systems, thus eliminating habitat for the Newcomb's snail.

The proposed Wainiha River critical habitat unit was eliminated from the final rule. The landowner, Alexander and Baldwin, Inc., already is supporting voluntary conservation projects in the Wainiha River Valley and indicated that designation of critical habitat could have a negative impact on future efforts such as the reintroduction of the Newcomb's snail in the stream and projects to conserve rare plants in the upper reaches of the valley.

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“The Endangered Species Act requires the Fish and Wildlife Service to consider economic and other relevant impacts of designating critical habitat in making its decisions,” explained Henson. “We believe the benefits of Alexander and Baldwin’s voluntary conservation efforts outweigh those associated with designating critical habitat, so we chose not to include the Wainiha Valley unit in our final designation.”

The proposed critical habitat areas are found largely on state land already managed for conservation purposes. Three units are within the Na Pali Coast State Park, and three others are within Halela, Kealia, and Lihue-Koloa Forest Reserves. Two units are on private lands.

Critical habitat refers to geographic areas that are essential to the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and that may require special management considerations. A designation does not create a preserve or refuge and only applies to situations where federal funding, permits, or projects are involved. Designation of critical habitat has no regulatory impact on the state or private landowners taking actions on their land unless federal funding or permits are required.

The Newcomb’s snail lives only in fresh water and spends its entire life in the same stream. The larvae of most other freshwater Hawaiian snails are found within ocean waters, where they disperse to other stream systems for the adult stage of their life cycle. Its shell is smooth, oval, and black and is approximately one-quarter inch long. The snail feeds upon algae and other material growing on submerged rocks.

Although biologists estimate that between 6,000 and 7,000 Newcomb’s snails exist on Kauai, more than 90 percent of the snails are found in two populations in small areas along the Kalalau Stream and Lumahai River. This makes these animals very susceptible to catastrophic events such as hurricanes, landslides, and invasions of nonnative predators, Badgley explained.

Currently, predation by alien species such as the rosy glandina snail, marsh flies, the green swordtail fish, the American bullfrog, and the wrinkled frog is a significant threat to the species. Natural disasters and habitat alteration also threaten the Newcomb’s snail. Habitat loss and degradation through water diversion and well drilling are suspected to have caused the historical decline of the snail.

The Newcomb’s snail was listed as a threatened species on January 26, 2000. Although designation of critical habitat was found to be prudent at the time, it was not proposed due to other workload priorities. On June 2, 2000, the U.S. District Court in Hawaii ordered the Service to publish the critical habitat designation for the species by February 1, 2002. The court later extended that deadline to August 10, 2002.

The final rule to designate critical habitat for the Newcomb’s snail was published in today’s *Federal Register* and is available on the Fish and Wildlife Service website at pacificislands.fws.gov.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses nearly 540 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.